



## Uncovering a Hidden Cultural Treasure in the Marigny

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Historic Building Recovery Grant Program

FOR SOME TIME, I've wondered how many people are familiar with the Musée Rosette Rochon, a cultural museum dedicated to promoting the history of free persons of color at 1515 Pauger St. in the Faubourg Marigny.

If you live near the Marigny Triangle you may have walked to the French Quarter to buy bread just like Rosette Rochon, a free woman of color, probably did 200 years ago. Perhaps on your way to work one morning you traipsed past the simple, elegant beige and white Creole cottage built by Rochon in the early 19th century. For those living outside the neighborhood, you may have driven past the museum one night en route to

the restaurants and clubs on Frenchmen Street. However, tucked away deep within the Marigny without a marker or sign, the building and cultural legacy of the woman who built and owned it remains obscure; its fascinating heritage languishing in anonymity.

Born into slavery and mixed-race Creole ancestry in Mobile, Alabama, in 1766, Rosette Rochon was freed by her white father in 1770. After eventually settling in New Orleans as a free person of color, Rochon quickly became an entrepreneur, setting up residency in the mixed-race milieu of the newly formed Creole suburbs as the city expanded downriver from the French



A classic element of the Creole style, an *abat-vent* is an overhang that provides a small amount of protection without obstructing the sidewalk — a good adaptation for a structure that is built directly on the public thoroughfare.



The tightly closed vertical white batten shutters close off the house, perhaps a metaphor of its anonymity and the concealed Creole legacy inside.

Quarter. This was post-colonial New Orleans, a time when French was still widely spoken in the city, and places like Faubourg Marigny and Tremé provided a welcoming environment for Rochon.

As a businesswoman, she bought and sold mortgages, owning many properties and running several grocery stores. Records reveal Rochon also owned slaves, which may seem odd to modern sensibilities, especially considering that she herself was born into slavery and then later freed. Rochon, however, was very much a part of the harsh reality of a slave-based economy. Ultimately, she was “a banker of sorts” says Eugene Cizek, director of Historic Preservation Studies at Tulane University and lead architect on the restoration of the museum on Pauger Street, adding “there are many mysterious aspects that make the building and the life of Rosette Rochon interesting.”

Similarly, the French and mixed-race persons of Creole ancestry like Rochon left behind a wonderful cultural legacy that endures today, including cuisine, music and Mardi Gras.

AS A NONPROFIT with 501(c) 3 status, the Musée Rosette Rochon has provided learning opportunities for students among area universities. As a result, a range of students and college programs have set up shop in the museum, unraveling its history and creating drawings for the interior and exterior to be used for an authentic restoration of the building. Some of the early class efforts from the Preservation Studies Program led by Cizek produced drawings of the building for the Historic American Building Survey (HABS),

which won the prestigious Peterson Prize. In addition, interior design students at Louisiana State University led by Leon Steele, now working with the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation's Main Street Program, discovered an appreciation of the building and historic preservation while gaining valuable experience producing interior drawings based on period-specific furnishings. Working in the immediate aftermath of Katrina, Steele says the storm "underscored the importance of historic preservation, the need to protect our collective heritage and sense of place because it can be lost in an instant."

To assist with repairs caused by hurricane damage, the museum received a grant from the Historic Building Recovery Grant Program to fix gutters, siding, windows and floors, doors, and brick piers. Currently, the museum is slated to undergo repairs to the deteriorated brick between post walls. At the same time, ideas are in the works to continue and expand on educational outreach efforts, creating fun and engaging workshops involving Creole cooking and local craft demonstrations. The museum would also make a great setting for workplace training in the building crafts providing hands-on classes for plaster repair for example. One idea "would be to create some sort of learning service project," says Cizek. "Students and the general public could learn quite a lot from this building in that it would provide a good display of how you might go about repairing and renovating such a house." In fact, he further attests that this would make a wonderful Creole architectural museum.

**THIS STYLE** of Creole cottage is often incorrectly labeled as transitional Greek Revival, due to its delicate exterior details. However, "there is nothing Greek Revival about it. It is as Creole



Delicate French doors and transoms are protected behind the exterior batten shutters. Note the subtle detailing of the decorative hinges and hardware.



The delicate detailing of the roof dormer is a defining ornamental feature of the house-proud Creole culture.

as you can get," says Cizek. In fact, he adds, what makes this building so special is that "it is a perfect example of a first generation cottage or early Creole cottage." It has brick-between-post construction (*brique-entre-poteaux*), 12-over-12 windows sashes, and beautiful geometry and proportions. The *abat-vent*, or overhang, projecting out from the main structure on the façade is also a classic attribute.

Some people would call the building quaint. However, owner Don Richmond believes there is a difference between simplicity and quaintness. Simplicity comes out of a harmonious relationship with one's surroundings. Think of an uncluttered space that is not overly decorated. Free persons of color and Creoles were house proud, but "they were not into flash and ostentation" according to Richmond. The simplicity is echoed in the plain yet elegant geometry of the building and also in the streamlined pattern present in the transoms above the doors. It is uplifting, pleasing and functional but not busy.

The Creole cottage type used to be more prevalent in the city, Cizek says. In fact during the Antebellum period, the predominant residential building type for construction was not the shotgun but the one-and-a-half-story Creole cottage, and not just in Tremé or Faubourg Marigny, but in Uptown and Central City as well. What may appear to be a Victorian in Central City is oftentimes an updated, remodeled version of a Creole cottage, says Cizek. This longevity of the Creole cottage owes itself to its sturdy construction and the fact that the building type is well suited for a wet climate with settlement issues and hurricanes. Because of the way the heavy timber framing is tied together, Cizek likens these cottages to being "built like the belly of a ship with the roof tied into the walls and the walls tied into each other" thus allowing the building to flex with the wind. Additionally, the buildings were kept off the ground, resisting rising damp, and allowing "for easy adjustment to differential

settlement," says Cizek.

Richmond believes that "the great exponent of our heritage in New Orleans is our architectural library of buildings." Over the centuries, however, many of these buildings have been torn down in the name of progress and expansion. In today's post-Katrina environment, this unfortunate trend has only accelerated. Therefore, restoration of a building such as this is vitally important to our architectural legacy. To see this city lose more of this increasingly rare house type would be a terrible loss of an iconic non-renewable cultural resource.

To arrange a tour and/or donate funds to help restore this hidden gem of New Orleans, call Don Richmond at 504.947.7673 or visit the Musée Rosette Rochon Web site at <http://www.rosetterochon.com>



The quietly elegant building is set in a pedestrian-friendly neighborhood, only a few blocks from the Vieux Carré and Frenchmen Street.

#### For Further Reading and Research

- Philip Gilmore, Musée Rosette Rochon: A Hidden Gem, *Preservation in Print*, May 2009.
- Lester Sullivan, Xavier Archives Exhibit Focuses on Musée Rosette Rochon, *Preservation in Print*, May 1999.
- Musée Rosette Rochon: A Historic New Orleans House Museum Honoring the Accomplishments of Free People of Color. Web site, <http://www.rosetterochon.com/>, (Accessed Feb. 28, 2009)
- *Raised to the Trade: Creole Building Arts of New Orleans*, by John Michael Vlach, <http://www.noma.org/educationguides/CreoleBuildArt.pdf>
- Friends of the Cabildo. *New Orleans Architecture Volume IV: The Creole Faubourgs*. Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Company, 1996.
- *Creole Angel: The Self Identity of the Free People of Color of Antebellum New Orleans*, Ben Melvin Hobratch, <http://digital.library.unt.edu/permalink/meta-dc-5369:1>